

NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-601C
ELAINE JOHANSON

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FOCUS: VICTORAS PETKUS

ANNCR:

VICTORAS PETKUS, A LITHUANIAN DISSIDENT, IS NOT WIDELY KNOWN IN THE WEST. IN FACT, THE WORLD BARELY NOTICED LAST WEEK WHEN A SOVIET COURT SENTENCED HIM TO A PRISON LABOR CAMP. PERHAPS IT'S BECAUSE THE WESTERN PRESS WAS ABSORBED IN THE MORE SPECTACULAR EVENTS SURROUNDING THE TRIALS OF DISSIDENTS SHCHARANSKY AND GINZBURG. YET, HIS FATE AS A CONVICTED DISSIDENT IS JUST AS HARSH. VOA'S ELAINE JOHANSON HAS THIS PROFILE OF MISTER PETKUS:

VOICE:

A SOVIET COURT IN VILNIUS, THE CAPITAL OF LITHUANIA, FOUND DISSIDENT VICTORAS PEKTUS GUILTY OF ANTI-SOVIET ACTIVITY AND SENTENCED HIM TO TEN YEARS IN PRISON AND FIVE YEARS OF INTERNAL EXILE. DURING THE TRIAL, HE WAS ALSO ACCUSED OF HOMOSEXUALITY, CORRUPTION OF MINORS AND DRUNKENNESS.

BUT TO OTHER DISSIDENTS, VICTORAS PEKTUS, NOW FORTY-NINE YEARS OLD, IS KNOWN AS A STAUNCH LITHUANIAN NATIONALIST. HE FIRST TOOK UP THE CAUSE OF HUMAN RIGHTS WHEN LITHUANIA LOST ITS INDEPENDENCE TO THE SOVIET UNION MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS AGO. HE WAS A MEMBER OF A CATHOLIC YOUTH GROUP THAT FOUGHT AGAINST SOVIET RULE. THIS COST HIM SIX YEARS IN PRISON.

HIS DEVOTION TO LITHUANIAN INDEPENDENCE AND HISTORY GREW STRONGER DURING HIS INTERNMENT. AND AFTER HIS RELEASE, HE STUDIED LITHUANIAN LITERATURE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF VILNIUS. BUT PETKUS WAS ARRESTED AGAIN IN THE LATE NINETEEN FIFTIES, THIS TIME FOR POSSESSION OF WHAT SOVIET AUTHORITIES CALLED "ANTI-SOVIET LITERATURE" -- A COLLECTION OF POEMS PUBLISHED BEFORE THE REVOLUTION. HE WAS RELEASED IN 1965.

AS A HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST AND AN EXPERT IN LITHUANIAN LITERATURE, PETKUS ATTRACTED A WIDE CIRCLE OF YOUNG LITHUANIANS, WHO IN TURN, ATTRACTED THE ATTENTION OF THE KGB. THEY WERE CONSTANTLY QUESTIONED ABOUT PETKUS, AND REPORTEDLY WERE FORCED TO SIGN FALSE STATEMENTS ABOUT HIM. THE CASE AGAINST VICTORAS PETKUS WAS STRENGTHENED AFTER NINETEEN SEVENTY-FIVE, WHEN HE BECAME A FOUNDING MEMBER OF THE LITHUANIAN GROUP MONITORING SOVIET COMPLIANCE WITH THE HELSINKI ACCORDS. AND NOW, A THIRD PRISON TERM.

WHAT HAPPENS TO A MAN AFTER THIRTY YEARS OF FIGHTING FOR IDEALS THAT ARE OFFICIALLY UNPOPULAR? ACCORDING TO ONE REPORT OF PETKUS DURING HIS LATEST TRIAL, HE DIDN'T ADMIT GUILT, REFUSED TO ANSWER QUESTIONS AND SAID "DO WITH ME WHAT YOU WILL." THEN VICTORAS PETKUS PUT HIS HEAD ON THE GUARD RAIL AND PRETENDED TO SLEEP.

JS/RTD